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Where We Cannot Remain Standing

Isabella Louise Argondizza
Bard College, ia3776@bard.edu

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Where We Cannot Remain Standing

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Isabella Louise Argondizza

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2021

Table of Contents

Musical Program	1
About the Artists	2
Notes on the Program	3
Mélodies Passagères, Op. 27 (songs 1-2)	5
La Romance d'Ariel, L. 54	8
Vier Lieder, Op. 2	11
Regret, L. 55	15
Mélodies Passagères, Op. 27 (songs 3-5)	18
Concluding Thoughts	20
Bibliography	22
Direct Links to Recordings	24
Acknowledgments	25

Where We Cannot Remain Standing

Isabella Argondizza, Soprano

David Sytkowski, Pianist

From *Mélodies Passagères*, Op. 27

Samuel Barber

(1910-1981)

Puisque tout passe

Un cygne

La Romance d'Ariel, L. 54

Claude Debussy

(1862-1918)

Vier Lieder, Op. 2

Arnold Schoenberg

(1874-1951)

Erwartung

Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm

Erhebung

Waldsonne

Regret, L. 55

Claude Debussy

From *Mélodies Passagères*, Op. 27

Samuel Barber

Tombeau dans un parc

Le Clocher Chante

Départ

“I believe that almost all our sadnesses are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living. Because we are alone with the alien thing that has entered our self; because everything intimate and accustomed is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing.”

~ Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet, Eight

About the Artists



Scottish-born soprano **Isabella Argondizza** is currently a senior in the undergraduate Bard College Music Program, studying with Teresa Buchholz and David Sytkowski. A graduate of The Music School of Douglas Academy in Milngavie, Scotland, Isabella focused on violin performance throughout her younger years. Since arriving at Bard in 2017, Isabella has grown to be an ambitious classical singer and has performed most recently as an ensemble member by invitation in *Sing, Bard!* A Graduate Program Gala Concert with Stephanie Blythe, Belinda in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and as Miss I in *Promenade* by María Irene Fornés at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, NY.

Isabella is the Bard College 2020 Presser Undergraduate Scholar and was also the recipient of the 2019 Paul J. Pacini Prize in Music at Bard College.



David Sytkowski, pianist and vocal coach, is a Visiting Artist in Residence at Bard College, where he is Director of Music for Opera Workshop, coaches singers and teaches piano.

In September 2019, he made his Joe's Pub debut in *Under The Influence* with legendary cabaret artist Justin Vivian Bond. This led to Auntie Glam's Happy Hour, a weekly livestream with Mx. Bond during the initial COVID-19 shut down that New York Times critic Zachary Woolf proclaimed one of "The Best of the Year's At-Home Divas" in December 2020.

As principal music coach for the Bard SummerScape festival for six years, he has prepared Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* and *Das Wunder Der Heliane*, Rubenstein's *Demon*, Rimsky-Korsakov's *The Tsar's Bride*, Dvorak's *Dimitrij*, Mascagni's *Iris*, Smyth's *The Wreckers*, and Weber's *Euryanthe*.

Other recent engagements include the New York premiere of Gregory Spears's *Fellow Travelers* for the PROTOTYPE festival in January 2018, Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All* for the reopening of the Hudson Opera House in Fall 2017 with R.B. Schlather, Berkshire Opera Festival's inaugural production of *Madama Butterfly*, Hindemith's *The Long Christmas Dinner* and Von Schillings's *Mona Lisa* with American Symphony Orchestra. He frequently appears as a symphony pianist and collaborator at venues such as Carnegie Hall, Weill Recital Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center and the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts.

Notes on the Program

Where We Cannot Remain Standing is the culmination of my contemplation and growth while being a performer and student during the COVID-19 pandemic. How does a singer connect to their fellow musicians and audiences when traditional methods are no longer safe? As Rainer Maria Rilke describes, the ongoing isolation is “the alien thing” (*Letters*, 40) that has entered all of us. This year has been intensely emotional and unpredictable, a state of constant transition. The solitude has given me space for reflection, and this project shows the inspirations behind my recital concept. It brings together every possible element of my passions, knowledge of performance, and identity to convey a meaningful journey through the repertoire.

Studying these works has been a balm for the emotional unrest that has occurred and has thus, given me a sense of repose in my singing and learning. The pandemic removed me from the relative stability that attending college had provided. Thrust into a new living situation, I was separated from all things familiar. I resorted to rereading books and poems I enjoyed in the past as a way to ground myself during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had read Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* a few times before, and his attitude toward solitude and the creative process reminded me to be patient and present in the moment regardless of uncertainty. I found as I was looking for repertoire, I was drawn to settings of Rilke’s poetry, themes of reflection, and other works connected to him. Moreover, his extended use of duality throughout his work resonated with my hardships over the past year. While isolation has been difficult, the ability to focus on myself and artistry has been positive.

I have discovered time is fleeting and one’s perception of reality is in a constant state of flux. As Rilke wrote in the first of ten *Letters to a Young Poet*:

“Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures.” (*Letters*, 15)

This intangible sense of being has been an immense source of inspiration for the themes in this program. A singer’s realm in art is an amalgamation of text and sound, the articulate and ineffable joined. A performance is a realisation of a composition that is never truly repeatable, but it is the performers’ role to present an enduring musical work in their own unique capacities.

The pieces on this program explore duality, the transformation of self through experience, memory, and reflection. Each ultimately considers the notion of being human with a mind, body, and heart – in a changing and often brutal world. Over the course of this project, I have utilised this music to enhance my physicality as a performer and sing with the intention of communication. The dedication to the present moment, to move and adapt with my body, has allowed me the freedom to express the text and embrace the beauty of my voice.

Mélodies Passagères, Op. 27 (1950/51)

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Text by Rainer Maria Rilke

A notable American composer of the 20th Century, Samuel Barber was known for his affinity for poetry and extensive composition of songs. A talented baritone himself, he wrote effortlessly for voice, and maintained a lyricism that captured his romantic musical style. Barber composed his *Mélodies Passagères* in two parts between 1950 and 1951. The first, fourth, and fifth songs written in the early part of 1950 for soprano Eileen Farrell. The second and third songs were composed later, with all five performed as a cycle by Barber himself at the piano and baritone Pierre Bernac in 1952.

Barber's choice of text for this cycle is quite remarkable. Not only is this the only song cycle he wrote in a foreign language, but the poet was not writing in his native language either. Rilke, an Austrian-German writer, moved to Switzerland toward the end of his life and chose to primarily write in French. For him, writing in French was a means to renew his exploration of poetry and wordplay. The poetry is imbued with Rilke's foreboding mortality, as his last few years were littered with illness. All five of the poems that Barber chose to set are from this period in Rilke's life. Barber's *Mélodies Passagères* are a realisation of Rilke's poetry as a swan song. The cycle begins with a passing song and ends in departure – synonymous with death.

While it is unconventional to break up a song cycle, I decided to do so because I wanted the Rilke poetry to frame the beginning and end of the project, as his work contextualizes the entire program.

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*Puisque tout passe*](#)

Puisque tout passe

Puisque tout passe, faisons
la mélodie passagère;
celle qui nous désaltère,
aura de nous raison.

Chantons ce qui nous quitte
avec amour et art;
soyons plus vite
que le rapide départ.

~ Rilke

Since all is passing

Since all is passing, let's make
The passing song;
The one that quenches our thirst for us will be
right.

We sing that which leaves us
With love and art;
Let's be faster
Than the quickest departure.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*Un Cygne*](#)

Un Cygne

Un cygne avance sur l'eau
tout entouré de lui-même,
comme un glissant tableau;
ainsi à certains instants
un être que l'on aime
est tout un espace mouvant.

Il se rapproche, doublé,
comme ce cygne qui nage,
sur notre âme troublée...
qui à cet être ajoute
la tremblante image
de bonheur et de doute.

~ Rilke

The Swan

A swan advances on the water
All surrounded by itself,
Like a gliding tableau;
So at some moments
A being that we love
Is all one space moving.

It gets closer, doubled,
Like this swan who swims,
On our troubled soul...
Which to this being adds
The trembling image
Of happiness and of doubt.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Barber's care for the text is evident in his attentive settings. For example, in *Un Cygne*, continuous sextuplets in the piano line represent the minute ripples of the water, as the swan effortlessly glides along. Barber enhances his text painting in the line “est tout un espace

mouvant”, when the music suddenly becomes homophonic, the singer and pianist moving together. Thereafter, the two parts diverge again. The cycle only enhances Rilke’s poetry.

As I delved deeper into the works of Rilke, I came across his poem “The Spirit Ariel”, which he wrote after reading Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. I was taken with his depiction of the relationship between Ariel and Prospero. This was the first time I had read a poetic response to a play and was intrigued to find that Ariel is a monumental fictional figure depicted in many paintings, ballets, operas, and poems. Rilke writes of Ariel’s love of Prospero while also wanting desperately to be freed from servitude.

Ariel

Once, somewhere, somehow, you had set him free
 with that sharp jolt which as a young man tore you
 out of your life and vaulted you to greatness.
 Then he willing; and, since then, he serves,
 after each task impatient for his freedom.
 And half imperious, half almost ashamed,
 you make excuses, say that you still need him
 for this and that, and, ah, you must describe
how you helped him. Yet you feel, yourself,
 that everything held back by his detention
 is missing from the air. How sweet, how tempting:
 to let him go—to give up all your magic.
 submit yourself to destiny like the others,
 and know that his light friendship, without strain now,
 with no more obligations, anywhere,
 an intensifying of this space you breathe,
 is working the element, thoughtlessly.
 Henceforth dependent, never again empowered
 to shape the torpid mouth into that call
 at which he dived. Defenseless, aging, poor,
 and yet still breathing *him* in, like a fragrance
 spread endlessly, which makes the invisible
 Complete for the first time. Smiling that you ever
 could summon him and feel so much at home
 in that vast intimacy. Weeping too, perhaps,
 when you remember how he loved and yet
 wished to leave you: always both, at once.

~ Rilke (Translated by Mitchell, 108-111)

The last lines highlight the duality of the experience of love and the complexity of relationships. Ariel is at once bound by Prospero, yearning to leave, but also cares for him.

The theme of duality is present also in Paul Bourget's poem "La Romance d'Ariel." In the last verses of the song Ariel is describing the dark lake at the bottom of the valley as a changeable mirror. A mirror, while literally being a reflection, also expresses the polarizing emotions of love.

La Romance d'Ariel, L. 54 (1884)

Claude Debussy (1862 - 1918)

Text by Paul Bourget

Claude Debussy was one of the foremost French composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Bourget was a contemporary of Debussy, and his poetry was often a favourite for Debussy to set to music. In Bourget's poem "La Romance d'Ariel", Ariel sings about using his magical power over water and wind spirits to convince Miranda, Prospero's daughter, to love and marry Ferdinand. The original poem has two stanzas preceding Debussy's song:

In Ariel's soul a music vibrates
 - Ô, Miranda! it is the music of your voice, -
 Which gives him a regret for the bond of yesteryear
 And the hatred of the hour when the Duke made her free.

He seeks a cool corner of the island to sit
 Frail spirit in the middle of the frail fern;
 Around him blue water with green trees mingles
 And his slow song rises with the evening ...

~ Bourget (Translated by Paley)

Prospero, after giving Miranda away and setting Ariel free, chooses a life of solitude. Ariel, although not a human entity, does not escape from the experience of conflicting emotions in his relationship to Prospero and, through this song, is cautioning Miranda about love. The

entire poem interweaves the pain of loss, love, and regret. The themes of *La Romance D'Ariel* are connected to the next Debussy song in the program, *Regret*, also written by Bourget.

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*La Romance d'Ariel*](#)

La Romance d'Ariel

Au long de ces montagnes douces,
Dis! viendras-tu pas à l'appel
De ton délicat Ariel
Qui velouté à tes pieds les mousses?

Suave Miranda, je veux
Qu'il fasse juste assez de brise
Pour que ce souffle tiède frise
Les pointes d'or de tes cheveux!

Les clochettes des digitales
Sur ton passage tinteront;
Les églantines sur ton front
Effeuilleront leurs blancs pétales.

Sous le feuillage du bouleau
Blondira ta tête bouclée;
Et dans le creux de la vallée
Tu regarderas bleuir l'eau,

L'eau du lac lumineux ou sombre,
Miroir changeant du ciel d'été,
Qui sourit avec sa gaîté
Et qui s'attriste avec son ombre;

Symbole, hélas! du cœur aimant,
Où le chagrin, où le sourire,
De l'être trop aimé, se mire
Gaîment ou douloureusement

Au long de ces montagnes douces,
Dis! viendras-tu pas à l'appel
De ton délicat Ariel
Qui velouté à tes pieds les mousses?

~ Bourget

Ariel's Song

Along these soft mountains,
Say! Would you not come on the call
Of your delicate Ariel
Who smooths the moss at your feet?

Sweet Miranda, I wish
There would be just enough breeze
So that this mild breath curls
The golden tips of your hair!

The little bells of foxgloves
Chime on your way;
The wild rose on your forehead
Will drop their white petals.

Under the silver birch leaves
Your curly head will become more blond;
And in the hollow of the valley
You will watch the water turn blue,

Light or dark lake water,
Changing mirror of the summer sky,
who smiles with cheerfulness
And who is saddened with its shadow;

Symbol, alas! Of the loving heart,
Where the sorrow, where the smile,
From being too loved, is mirrored
Cheerfully or painfully

Along these soft mountains,
Say! Would you not come on the call
Of your delicate Ariel
Who smooths the moss at your feet?

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Although only in his twenties when he composed this piece, we can hear Debussy's sophistication and depth of artistry in response to the poetry and character of Ariel. While Debussy maintains a harmonic fluidity throughout the piece, the centerpoint of the song "Sous le feuillage du bouleau," incorporates Bourget's reflective imagery of the water in the tonality. The $D \flat$ in the bassline becomes a harmonic mirror. $D \flat$ is the point of reflection in either direction; we ascend a major 3rd to F on "Et dans le creux de la vallée," then descend from $D \flat$ to A on "Qui sourit avec sa gaieté." Not only does this text painting make the tonality ambiguous but also, through harmony, illuminates the paradoxical duality of pain and happiness in love.

In addition to using the relationship of Ariel and Prospero as metaphor for self-reflection and duality, Rilke also features window imagery in his posthumous collection *Vergers* (*Orchards*). In the two poems below, Rilke writes of windows as the frame of "our enormous life." They are simultaneously a boundary from the outer world while acting as a frame for understanding it, inviting onlookers to peer through them.

Windows III

Are you not our geometry,
Window, very simple form
Which without effort circumscribes
Our enormous life?

The one we love is never more beautiful
Than when we see her appear
Framed by you; it is, O window,
That you make it most eternal.

All chances are abolished. The being
Stands in the midst of love,
With that little space around
Which one is master.

~ Rilke (Translated by Isabella Argondizza)

Windows IV

Window, you, oh measure of waiting,
So often filled,
When a life is poured out and is impatient
Towards another life.

You who separate and who attract,
Changing like the sea, -
Ice, suddenly, where our face is reflected
Mingled with what we see through;

Sample of a freedom compromised
By the presence of fate;
Hold by which among us is equalised
The great excess of the outside.

~ Rilke (Translated by Isabella Argondizza)

Music, and more specifically Art Song, act as a frame to poetry and experience. That is to say that as interpreters, we offer a glimpse into “the great excess of the outside” (Windows IV) and “the more inexpressible than all else” (*Letters*, 15). Through programming, venue, and presentation, we enrich an audience’s familiarity with us, themselves, and the world at large.

Richard Dehmel, a contemporary of Rilke’s, also incorporated framing imagery in the three narrative poems used by Schoenberg in *Vier Lieder*. Their focuses were wildly different, however, as Dehmel’s poems are brimming with sensuality. Rilke published the following criticisms in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

“His poetic power is great, strong as a primitive instinct... It is *not* immaculate, it is marked by time and by passion, and little of it will survive and endure. (But most art is like that!)” (*Letters*, 24)

Despite Rilke’s criticism of Dehmel’s poetry, Schoenberg’s setting of the text elevates the three poems and gives them an enduring quality.

Vier Lieder, Op. 2 (1899)

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Text by Richard Dehmel and Johannes Schlaf

Schoenberg, in his mid twenties at the time of his compositions of *Vier Lieder*, also wrote *Verklarte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) for string sextet inspired by the poem “Weib und die Welt” (Woman And The World) by Richard Dehmel. These compositions were written around the same time as some other notable works, such as Edward Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*, Jean Sibelius’s *Concerto No. 1 in E minor* and Jules Massenet's opera *Cendrillon*. His harmonic language is far beyond that of his contemporaries, and he proved himself an innovator of compositional technique well into the 20th century.

Schoenberg was taken with the lush imagery of Dehmel's poetry, which, by way of the window, guides us through physical space. This intense focus frames the lovers' story. The vivid descriptions of each passing moment capture how quickly life can change. We travel with our protagonist pondering his marriage proposal late at night through to the engagement bliss the following evening. Schoenberg modifies the narrative with Johannes Schlaf's poem, "Waldsonne," as its imagery matches that of Dehmel and acts as a recapitulation and conclusion.

Right click link, select "open in new tab" to listen: [Erwartung](#)

Erwartung

Aus dem meergrünen Teiche
Neben der roten Villa
Unter der toten Eiche
Scheint der Mond.

Wo ihr dunkles Abbild
Durch das Wasser greift,
Steht ein Mann
Und streift einen Ring von seiner Hand.

Drei Opale blinken;
Durch die bleichen Steine
Schwimmen rot und grüne Funken
Und versinken.

Und er küßt sie,
Und seine Augen leuchten
Wie der meergrüne Grund:
Ein Fenster tut sich auf.

Aus der roten Villa
Neben der toten eiche
Winkt ihm eine bleiche Frauen-hand.

~ Dehmel

Anticipation

From the seagreen pond
Beside the red villa
Under the dead oak
Shines the moon.

Where her dark reflection
Through the water reaches,
Stands a man
And slips a ring from his hand.

Three opals glimmer;
Through the bleached stones
Swim red and green sparkles
And sink.

And he kisses her,
And his eyes shine
Like the sea-green ground:
A window opens itself up.

From the red villa
Next to the dead oak
A woman's pale hand waves to him.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm*](#)

Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm

Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm;
Jeder Morgen soll dich mahnen,
Daß du mir die Haare küßttest.

Schenk mir deinen seidenen Schwamm;
Jeden Abend will ich ahnen,
Wem du dich im Bade rüstest,
Oh, Maria!

Schenk mir Alles, was du hast;
Meine Seele ist nicht eitel,
Stolz empfang ich deinen Segen.

Schenk mir deine schwerste Last:
Willst du nicht auf meinen Scheitel
Auch dein Herz, dein Herz noch legen,
Magdalena?

~ Dehmel

Give me your Golden Comb

Give me your golden comb;
Every morning should remind you,
That you kissed my hair.

Give me your silk sponge;
Every evening I want to guess,
Who you are in the bath preparing for,
Oh, Maria!

Give me everything that you have;
My soul is not vain,
I proudly receive your blessing.

Give me your heavy burden:
Will you not lay on me your head
your heart too, your heart still
Magdalena?

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*Erhebung*](#)

Erhebung

Gib mir deine Hand,
nur den Finger, dann
seh ich diesen ganzen Erdkreis
als mein Eigen an!

Oh, wie blüht mein Land!
Sieh dir's doch nur an,
daß es mit uns über die Wolken
in die Sonne kann!

~ Dehmel

Exaltation

Give me your hand,
Only the finger, then
I see the whole world
As my own!

Oh, how my country blooms!
Just look at me
That it can be with us over the clouds
In the sun!

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [Waldsonne](#)

Waldsonne

In die braunen, rauschenden Nächte
Flittert ein Licht herein,
Grüngolden ein Schein.

Blumen blinken auf und Gräser
Und die singenden, springenden
Waldwässerlein,
Und Erinnerungen.

Die längst verklungenen:
Golden erwachen sie wieder,
All deine fröhlichen Lieder.

Und ich sehe deine goldenen Haare glänzen,
Und ich sehe deine goldenen Augen glänzen
Aus den grünen, raunenden Nächten.

Und mir ist, ich läge neben dir auf dem Rasen
Und hörte dich wieder auf der glitzeblanken
Syrinx
In die blauen Himmelslüfte blasen.

In die braunen, wühlenden Nächte
Flittert ein Licht,
Ein goldener Schein.

~ Schlaf

Forest Sun

Into the brown rustling nights
Flitters a light in,
Gold-green glow.

Flowers gleam on, and grasses,
And the singing, jumping
Forestwater,
And memories.

The long faded away sounds:
Golden they wake up again,
All your happy songs.

And I see your golden hair shine,
And I see your golden eyes shine,
From the green, whispering nights.

And I feel like I am lying next to you on the lawn
And I heard you again blow on the shining
bare reeds,
In the blue skies.

Into the brown stirring nights,
Flitters a light,
A gold glow.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

The first song opens with a distinctive five-note harmony built from the tonic note (Frisch, 94). Beginning at the fourth stanza, Schoenberg, builds up tension by extensively decorating a cadential 6-4 chord throughout the text, and concluding this intense decoration on “Grund.” Following this crucial moment, he leads our attention to the window at “Ein Fenster” by returning to the aforementioned opening chord of the piece. However, this recapitulation is modified by a two-octave shift downward in the accompaniment. Such distinctive musical motifs and colouration complement the poetic images of the lovers and window.

*Regret, L. 55 (1885)***Claude Debussy** (1862 - 1918)

Text by Paul Bourget

Debussy composed *Regret* the year after *La Romance d'Ariel*, and the text is reminiscent of the loss and isolation of Prospero after freeing Miranda and Ariel. Although popular in his day, Bourget's poetry is typically remembered for being set to music by Debussy, an interesting commonality to share with Dehmel.

In Bourget's poem, the speaker, burdened with regret, introduces this dreamlike memory. To mimic the feeling of a dream and the fleeting nature of memory, Bourget passes through several verb tenses revealing the depth of the speaker's regret and how it exists simultaneously in the past, present and future. The speaker describes their regret as "faithful", implying that there is a tender choice to exist in their memory, and the time is altered retroactively. Time, and our perception of it, is not constant, but fluctuates based on one's experiences. Debussy chooses to repeat the opening lines of the poem, implicating that the speaker's reality is a cycle of reflection. This frame emphasizes the power of memory and regret in our daily lives.

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [Regret](#)

Regret

Devant de ciel d'été, tiède et calmé,
Je me souviens de toi comme d'un songe,
Et mon regret fidèle aime et prolonge
Les heures où j'étais aimé
Où j'étais aimé.

Les astres brilleront dans la nuit noire;
Le soleil brillera dans le jour clair;
Quelque chose de toi flotte dans l'air,
Qui me pénètre la mémoire.

Quelque chose de toi fut à moi:
Car j'ai possédé tout de ta pensée,
Et mon âme, trahie et délaissée,
Est encor tout entière à toi.

Devant de ciel d'été, tiède et calmé,
Je me souviens de toi comme d'un songe.

~ Bourget

Regret

Before the sky of summer, warm and calm,
I myself remember of you as of a dream,
And my regret, faithful, loves and prolongs
The hours where I was loved,
Where I was loved.

The stars will shine in the dark night;
The sun will shine in the clear day;
Something of you floats in the air,
Which penetrates my memory.

Something of you that was mine:
Because I have possessed all of your thoughts,
And my soul, betrayed and abandoned,
Is still all entirely yours.

Before the sky of summer, warm and calm,
I myself remember of you as a dream.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

In *Regret*, we seem to be in D major as there is D and an A in bass with an F# above. However, the extended fluctuation between B b (enharmonically A#) and B# in the lower right hand of the piano accompaniment suggests we are simultaneously in B minor. This creates a sense of ambiguity and furthers the idea of memory and time fluctuating.

Like the speaker of “Regret”, Rilke’s thoughts were dominated by reflection at the end of his life. Rilke wrote his text for *Mélodies Passagères* as he was becoming more ill, around the time he wrote the untitled poem below. Here, we see Rilke’s personification of Death and his relationship with it.

[Untitled]

My life is not this steeply sloping hour
in which you see me hurrying.
Much stands behind me;
I stand before it like a tree;
I am only one of my many mouths,
and at that, the one that will be
still the soonest.

I am the rest between two notes,
which are somehow always in discord
because Death's note wants to climb over --
but in the dark interval, reconciled,
they stay there trembling.

And the song goes on, beautiful.

~ Rilke (Translated by Mitchell)

In this poem Rilke, embodying his solitude, has become “the rest between two notes,” and predicts this is where he and Death will reconcile. Rilke treats Death as an old friend he has always known, highlighting life's ephemeral nature. The importance of music is also significant here. Despite the apparent finality of death, music continues, implying we go on in another form.

Mélodies Passagères, Op. 27 (1950/51)

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Text by Rainer Maria Rilke

This idea of death being an interval is explored in “Tombeau dans un parc”. Barber was prudent in his choice of poetry in creating this cycle as a swansong for Rilke.

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*Tombeau dans un parc*](#)

Tombeau dans un parc

Dors au fond de l’allée,
Tendre enfant, sous la dalle,
On fera le chant d’été
Autour de ton intervalle.

Si une blanche colombe
Passait au vol làhaut,
Je n’offrirais à ton tombeau
Que son ombre qui tombe.

~ Rilke

Grave in a Park

Sleep at the bottom of the alley,
Tender child, under the flagstone,
One will make a song of summer
Around your interval.

If a white dove
Passed in flight above,
I would only offer on your tomb
His shadow that falls.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [*Le clocher chante*](#)

Le clocher chante

Mieux qu’une tour profane,
Je me chauffe pour mûrir mon carillon.
Qu’il soit doux, qu’il soit bon
Aux Valaisannes.

Chaque dimanche, ton par ton,
Je leur jette ma manne;
Qu’il soit bon, mon carillon,
Aux Valaisannes.

Qu’il soit doux, Qu’il soit bon;
Samedi soir dans les channes
Tombe en gouttes mon carillon
Aux Valaisans des Valaisannes.

~ Rilke

The Bell Tower Sings

Better than a secular tower,
I am warmed to ripen my carillon.
May it be sweet, may it be good
For the girls of Valais.

Every Sunday, tone by tone,
I throw them my manna;
May it be good, my carillon,
For the girls of Valais.

May it be sweet, may it be good;
Saturday evening in the beer cups
Falls by drop my carillon
From the boys to the Girls of Valais.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Right click link, select “open in new tab” to listen: [Départ](#)

Départ

Mon amie, il faut que je parte.
 Voulez-vous voir
 L'endroit sur la carte?
 C'est un point noir.
 En moi, si la chose
 Bien me réussit, ce sera
 Un point rose
 Dans un vert pays.

~ Rilke

Departure

My friend, I must leave
 Would you like to see
 The place on the map?
 It is a black point.
 In me, if the thing
 Well succeeded me, It will be
 a pink point
 In a green land.

Translated by Isabella Argondizza

Barber sets each of these poems with the theme of bells tolling, signaling the departure at the end of the cycle. In *Tombeau dans un parc*, the piano accompaniment consists of ominous blocked chords. This texture is very sparse in comparison to the first two pieces, and this ceaseless yet slow progression of chords marks the imminence of death. In live performance, *Le clocher chante* would begin *attacca*. After a similar blocked chord, we are thrust into incessant broken chords. The sixteenth-note bell like ostinato in the right hand along with a pedal chord in the left hand create an all immersive soundscape of the echoing bell tower. The final song, *Départ*, opens with a quarter-note tolling bell motif encircled by a chromatic figure. The speaker is saying farewell and Barber concludes this cycle by returning to a *molto lento* to signify the weight of the departure. Moreover, the dissonant composition in comparison to the other pieces features the pain associated with this final parting.

Concluding Thoughts

In all five of his poems, Rilke seeks to describe the intangible, and Barber helps to bring these poems to life. Rilke acknowledges this power of music in the poem below:

To Music

Music: breathing of statues. Perhaps:
silence of paintings. You language where all language
ends. You time
standing vertically on the motion of moral hearts.

Feelings for whom? O you the transformation
of feelings into what?--: into audible landscape.
You stranger: music. You heart-space
grow out of us. The deepest space *in* us,
which, rising above us, forces its way out,--
holy departure:
when the innermost point in us stands
outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other
side of the air:
pure,
boundless,
no longer habitable.

~ Rilke (Translated by Mitchell, 142-143)

Language is a uniquely human way to externalise our many complex thoughts and feelings. Being precise with language is one way to communicate with others; but when words alone are not enough to express the profound, composers unite text with music. Rilke says, "...poems are not, as people think, simply emotions – they are experiences" (Kimball, 28). This convergence of text and music is expressed in the performance of Art Song by singer and pianist.

Rilke, in the poem above, speaks of music as a stranger from deep inside, akin to emotions that one is not familiar or comfortable with. When we reflect on this innermost stranger through Art Song, it becomes a boundless energy beyond the self in an audible landscape.

Singer and pianist contextualise these feelings in each passing moment, framing a view of the sublime and our inner humanity for an audience.

This year I have been unable to perform in front of audiences, and have had to seek other means to express my thoughts and share my voice. Quarantine has been a period of transition for me to cultivate my artistry and I have taken solace in Rilke's words:

“Works of art are of an infinite loneliness... Leave to your opinions their own quiet undisturbed development... There is here no measuring with time, no year matters, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like a tree... patience is everything!” (*Letters*, 23)

The idea of undisturbed development resonated with me greatly, and I realised that I was not patient with myself in my own learning and singing. Giving myself the grace that I would give to others showed me what I can achieve when I take care of my whole self. I spent time doing nothing, choosing to simply be present with myself physically and mentally. The practice of patience has given me the tools to express my art fully, as though music is growing out of me.

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Direct Links to Recordings

[Puisque tout passe](#)

[Un Cygne](#)

[La Romance d'Ariel](#)

[Erwartung](#)

[Schenk mir deinen goldenen Kamm](#)

[Erhebung](#)

[Waldsonne](#)

[Regret](#)

[Tombeau dans un parc](#)

[Le clocher chante](#)

[Départ](#)

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